DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 855 JC 010 172

AUTHOR Harris, Virginia B.

TITLE Evaluation of the Conversion to a Semester Academic Calendar at Snead State Community College.

PUB DATE 2000-11-00

NOTE 53p.; Practicum report presented to Nova Southeastern University for Doctor of Education.

PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Practicum Papers (043)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Educational Change; *School Schedules; *Semester System; *Student Attitudes; Student Surveys; Two Year Colleges

IDENTIFIERS *Snead State Community College AL

ABSTRACT

This practicum report evaluates student perception of the conversion to a semester academic calendar at Snead State Community College (Alabama). A survey instrument was used to record the responses of students at Snead about whether they viewed the conversion to a semester academic calendar to be a positive experience. Results of the study showed that 90.84% of students believed that transferring classes to four-year universities was simpler with all state system colleges and universities based on the semester academic calendar. Furthermore, students rated academic advisement and student services favorably in regard to the transition to the semester academic calendar. About 81% of the students said the materials provided by the college were helpful in understanding the transition to a semester academic calendar. Results also revealed that 69.64% of students believe they have a greater understanding of class material due to the semester academic calendar and the longer number of weeks spent in class. About 78% of students felt that the semester academic calendar would allow more time for family obligations. Appendices include survey instrument and survey responses. Contains 21 references. (JA)

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West Florida Cluster

A practicum report presented to Programs for Higher Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Nova Southeastern University

November, 2000

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Abstract of a practicum report presented to Nova Southeastern University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

EVALUATION OF THE CONVERSION TO A SEMESTER ACADEMIC CALENDAR AT SNEAD STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Virginia B. Harris

November, 2000

The problem under investigation was that it was unknown whether Snead State Community College (Snead State) students believed the transition to the semester academic calendar had been a positive experience. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the students' perception of the conversion to a semester academic calendar at Snead State. A survey instrument was used to record the responses of students at Snead State about whether they viewed the conversion to a semester academic calendar to be a positive experience. To accomplish the mission for this study, there was one research question: "Has the transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State students?"

The procedures used to complete this evaluation practicum were as follows: a literature review, establishment of criteria, validation of criteria, a pilot test, evaluation steering

committee review, validation committee review, data collection and analysis.

Results of the evaluation study indicated that a majority of students believed courses taught under the semester academic calendar were more easily transferable to state universities. Furthermore, students rated academic advisement and student services favorably in regard to the transition to the semester academic calendar. Additionally, the validation committee concluded that the results showed that students believed the conversion to a semester academic calendar to be a positive experience. It was concluded that the evaluation steering committee and the validation committee were extremely beneficial because of their expertise in the related fields. It was recommended that the results of this study be used to evaluate present policies, to continue promoting an academic environment and to further the philosophy, purpose, objectives, and services of Snead State.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Snead State Community College (Snead State) is located in the city of Boaz in Marshall County, Alabama. The college has a current enrollment of 1,867 students and serves the populace in portions of eight counties in Northeast Alabama. Snead State offers the associate degree in Arts, Science, Applied Science, and Occupational Technology. Snead State has certificate programs in 10 career and technical fields. All programs are accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Snead State Community College catalog, 1998-99, p. 12). Snead State is a state-supported two-year postsecondary institution that provides opportunities for academic development for youth and adults (Snead State Community College catalog, 1998-99, p. 12).

The mission of Snead State is consistent with that of The Alabama College System, that seeks to provide accessible quality educational opportunities, promote economic growth, and enhance the quality of life for the people of Alabama (Snead State Community College catalog, 1998-99, p. 12). Additionally, Snead State's mission is consistent with the legislative purpose for community colleges, which is ". . .to provide residents of this state with the opportunity to receive adequate instruction in the arts and sciences and in useful skills and trades. . ." *(Code of Alabama*, 1975 Section 16-60-82).

Nature of the Problem

In June 1997, the Chancellor of the Alabama College System and the Alabama State Board of Education mandated a change in the college academic calendar. According to correspondence from the office of Chancellor Fred Gainous (personal communication, June, 1997), the purpose of the mandate was to convert the college academic calendar from quarter hours to semester hours during the fall term 1998-99. The conversion would align the academic calendar of all Alabama System colleges with the majority of institutions in the country. Although many junior and community colleges in Alabama were on a quarter academic calendar, most four-year colleges have utilized the semester academic calendar for many years. Hickman (1998) claims that more than 85% of colleges and universities are already on the semester academic calendar (p.3). Snead State administrators welcomed the semester conversion evaluation because they were concerned with the possibility that students enrolled before the transition process could experience confusion. Administrators were concerned that students would believe they could lose credits or that students would become frustrated about class schedules if they did not have advisement pertaining to the conversion.

When this practicum was conducted, administrators, faculty, staff, and students at Snead State had completed the second academic term since the conversion from quarter hours to semester hours. Officials of The Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education had asked college administrators across the state to

evaluate the implementation process of the transition to a semester calendar. The problem was that it was unknown whether Snead State students believed the transition to the semester calendar had been a positive experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the students' perception of the conversion to a semester academic calendar at Snead State. A survey instrument was used to record the responses of students at Snead State about whether they viewed the conversion from quarter academic hours to semester academic hours to be a positive experience. Findings from this study would provide Snead State administrators, the Chancellor of the Alabama College System, and the Alabama State Board of Education with the specific data to compare the real outcome to the desired outcome of the conversion process. The results of this study could be used to plan additional advisement plans for students. The results of this evaluation could also be used to prepare a report to be submitted to the Alabama State Board of Education.

Significance to the Institution

When this practicum was conducted, Snead State's mission had been broadened to include technical and semi-professional career programs that would prepare students for specialized employment.

The data from this practicum was vital to the planning process at Snead State. Students' evaluation responses would reveal areas that need to be improved within the educational program at Snead State. For example, students' perception of

academic advisement, college services, and management activities would identify whether present practices should be modified. Students who had been enrolled during the quarter academic calendar might think the semester academic calendar was too long. On the other hand, students might believe the semester calendar was better because it eliminated one calendar unit of the school year. For the student, there would be one less registration, one less schedule of classes, and one less payment for tuition and books each year.

Part-time students were a concern to administrators. Given constraints on the time available to this population, the concern was that timing of required sequence courses be considered to ensure that they could complete degree programs.

Snead State personnel agreed that the goal for a successful conversion must conform to the stated purpose of the institution: to provide quality education to all students. Achieving this goal required full cooperation and support in planning and carrying out the curriculum. The semester calendar was considered advantageous because of the depth of study it allowed. There would be a greater span of time for study, for absorption of the course materials, for preparation, for evaluation, for subject coverage, and for student/instructor interaction. All the Snead State administrators believed that the transition to the semester academic calendar would improve the quality of education.

Relationship to the Seminar

This practicum addressed the Emergence of Higher Education seminar. During this seminar, students were taught to identify general themes and trends of the past that might be applicable to present-day educational institutions. Students were also encouraged to identify political decisions, economic and social trends, and historical incidents that had a major impact on the nature of higher education. Finally, students learned to examine changes or proposed changes that would lead to an improvement of the educational process within their own institution. The researcher believed that discovering how students perceive the transition to a semester academic calendar and utilizing The Statewide Articulation Reporting System (STARS) guide could improve academic advisement and articulation for students. Utilization of the STARS guide simplifies a student's transfer process from a two-year college to a four-year university.

Wattenbarger, Bryant, and Varcoe (1998) believe that a successful semester conversion could be the key to lessening the number of articulation problems among colleges and universities. Wattenbarger chaired a committee to study and develop policies and procedures for Alabama statewide adoption. The publication of this committee's studies became influential in the policies that were developed in a number of states (Wattenbarger, 1965). Tactics for mutual understanding and clear policies that assisted transferring students became the basis for articulation studies.

An Academic Program Completion Plan was suggested by the

Alabama Department of Postsecondary to use in academic advising. This plan, which was used by Snead State counselors, was to be designed by each college, department, or program for each degree and certificate program. The academic advisor and the student filled out this completion plan during an individual advisement session. This plan outlined the order of classes that the student would attend each semester academic term. It was intended to be a guideline for students outlining how students could complete degree requirements with semester courses although they had begun on the quarter academic calendar.

Research Question

The one research question for this study was "Has the transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State Community College students?" Areas of concern included the students' views on academic advisement, transference of previously earned college credits, and completion of program of study in a timely manner.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this practicum report, the following terms needed clarification.

Academic Program Completion Plan. The term "Academic Program Completion Plan" describes a schedule designed for each degree and certificate program. Although not all Alabama colleges are using these guidelines, all students at Snead State must meet with an advisor to complete an individual academic completion plan during which the student and the advisor sign and

date the Program Completion Plan. The plan outlines the order of classes that the student will attend each semester academic term.

Articulation. "Articulation" is a term that describes the acceptance of academic credits transferred from a two-year college to a four-year institution (Witt, Wattembarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1998).

Conversion/transition. The terms "conversion" and "transition" may be used interchangeably to describe the process of changing the college academic calendar from quarter credit hours to semester credit hours at Snead State.

Credit hours. The term "credit hours" describes the points earned as official acceptance of work completed by a student in a particular course. One course on the academic quarter calendar is worth five credit hours, while one course on the academic semester calendar is worth three credit hours.

Dually-enrolled students. The term "dually-enrolled students" describes students that are earning both high school credit and college credit for classes.

Full-time students. The term "full-time students" describes students enrolled in at least 15 quarter hours of courses per term or at least 12 semester hours of courses per term.

New students. The term "new students" refers to students that have enrolled in college for the first academic term. Since most new students attend orientation in the summer and matriculate in the fall, these new students would be scheduled for academic advisement immediately following their orientation.

Part-time students. The term "part-time students" refers to students enrolled in less than 15 quarter hours of courses per term or less than 12 semester hours of courses per term.

Quarter academic calendar. The term "quarter academic calendar" describes an academic calendar schedule in which a full-time student enrolls in three or more courses per term, each meeting about fifty minutes daily for five days per week for each ten-week quarter, for a total of 125 class hours per quarter and 375 class hours per year.

Returning students. The term "returning students" identifies students that have previous academic college credits. These students may have semester academic college credits and some quarter academic college credits that will need to be converted to semester credits. This includes students that may have been readmitted after an absence of one or more terms.

Semester academic calendar. The term "semester academic calendar" denotes a calendar schedule in which students take four or more courses per term, each meeting about two and one-half hours weekly for each fifteen-week semester, or 187.5 class hours per semester and 375 class hours per year.

The Statewide Articulation Reporting System (STARS). The "Statewide Articulation Reporting System (STARS)" is a term that describes a computerized system of articulation and planning to inform students about degree requirements, course equivalents, and other transfer information pertaining to majors at four-year institutions.

A student is given a state approved articulation/transfer guide that guarantees the transferability of course work among state institutions of higher education. Using the STARS database can prevent loss of course credit hours, can provide direction for the scheduling of course work, and can ease transition from one institution to another. The Alabama Legislative Act 94-202 of 1994, passed in March of 1994, requires all Alabama two-year and four-year educational institutions to develop a general studies curriculum of courses that is transferable from one institution to another (STARS guide, 1999).

Transfer students. The term "transfer students" refers to students enrolled in a degree program that will transfer to a four-year university. These students may have started at a System College on the quarter academic calendar, but they must complete their degree on the semester academic calendar.

Transition students. The term "transition students" refers to students that started their studies on the quarter academic calendar and will continue their studies on the semester academic calendar.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The literature reviewed for this study included topics concerning two-year and four-year institutions; the quarter/semester debate; the class options; and evaluation. Variations of the topics included characteristics of two-year colleges, articulation agreements, student transfers, student evaluations, and semester conversion process.

Two-year and Four-year Institutions

Lucas (1994) says that an alternative to a four-year public education came with the emergence of the junior colleges and community colleges (p.221). According to Lucas (1994), by the 1940's, more than 18 percent of all college students were enrolled in a two-year college (p. 221). Lucas (1994) continues: "Initially, many two-year schools saw themselves as 'feeders' to the more academically demanding and prestigious universities. The junior college and community college curriculum simply represented the first half of the total course of study that students completed before transferring to a four-year institution" (p.221). Blau (1996) adds that public two-year schools initially set out to prepare students for transfer. Students found that the associate degree programs were more flexible than most four-year degree programs. Although larger schools have more resources and offer greater choices for students, the degree completion rate is higher at small schools

(p. 116). Blau (1996) says that two-year schools currently enroll about 50 percent of first-time students (p. 114).

Lucas (1994) acknowledges that initially, two-year colleges catered to the needs of students that lacked the means or desire to embark upon a four-year curriculum directly from a high school or to those who sought relatively inexpensive instruction within commuting distance (p. 221).

Witt (1994) concurs with Blau and Lucas that the majority of students enrolled in the third year of degree-granting colleges are transfer students. In the decade between 1960 and 1970, the articulation process became a matter of institutional and system-wide policy concern throughout the community and junior college movement (p. 233). Students that perceive the semester conversion in a two-year college as positive would also see transference to a university as positive.

Witt (1994), states: "Accreditation agencies have always emphasized, as a measure of quality, the importance of the records of transfer students. The more recent emphasis upon student success and mission accomplishment has increased the concern for well-developed transfer procedures and policies" (p. 235). A successful transition to the semester academic calendar would ease the transition for students to a four-year university.

Witt (1994) reports that a concern for mutual understanding and clear policies that protected student credits became the basis for articulation studies. A monumental study under the

direction of a special committee researched articulation additional studies, emphasized certain procedures, and developed policies for Alabama statewide adoption. The policies specifically affected statewide requirements for general education, a common course numbering system, an achievement testing program, institution-to-institution liaison procedures (p. 234).

Haygood (1997) says: "Academic advising is central to a successful semester transition. Advisors are first-line resources for students seeking guidance and reassurance in choosing and completing academic programs" (p. 2). Haygood (1997) continues: "During the transition, advisors will have increased demands on their time by many new transition policies, courses, restructured programs and program objectives" (p. 2).

Finally, Haygood (1997) says advisors will need to continue stressing the positive aspects of converting to semesters. The positive aspects include the following: (a) fewer registration periods; (b) greater depth of course content covered under semesters; (c) more time to assimilate course material; (d) earlier availability for summer jobs and for full-time positions for graduating students; (e) more opportunities for taking summer courses at both community colleges and four-year institutions that are also on a semester calendar (p. 9).

Quarter/Semester Debate

Steinberg (1998) says: "Critics of the conversion to a semester academic calendar suggest that some faculty members have

complained that the switch from three 10-week quarters to two 15-week semesters would increase their workloads" (p.3). On the other hand, faculty members would have a longer period of time to prepare and teach materials. Steinberg (1998) says: "On contract issues alone, it could result in various kinds of litigation" (p. 4).

Dr. Orville C. Walz,(1998)the president of Concordia Teachers College in Seward, Nebraska, has studied college calendar trends for the past several decades. He notes that the early semester schedule has steadily become the schedule of choice, but he believes that colleges should not change their calendars just to conform. Walz (1998) warns that the early semester, mid-August to mid-December, holds some disadvantages for colleges: "Squeezing extra class days in before Labor Day often proves troubling because many states, especially those with big tourist trade, want students to work through the holiday" (p. 6). He continues: "Each institution's curriculum should determine its calendar. Some institutions, such as technical college programs, are better served by shorter terms" (p. 7). The Alabama state legislature mandated the change to a semester calendar; therefore, it was expected that there would be some adjustments during the conversion process.

North Carolina educator Hickman (1998) admits that it was a lot of work to revise the courses and the programs at Cape Fear Community College. Hickman (1998) says: "The process was not easy since each course had to be rewritten, each outline,

textbook, and syllabus had to be adapted to the semester format" (p.5). In spite of all the work, Hickman (1998) believes the change was necessary to ensure a smooth transition for students transferring to four-year universities: "The calendar change also brought administrative savings because now the college only has three registration sessions. I also think that the switch might have something to do with the school's increased enrollment, which was 20 percent over the previous year" (p.5.). Since students are on a semester calendar in high school and universities, it makes sense for students in two-year colleges to be on the semester calendar.

Carolyn Arnold (1996) proposes that semester conversion is a monumental task for every state college and university. She says: "Because the effort will renew, reshape, and refocus the educational programs, it will have a positive impact on future students and development of the institution" (p. 42). Arnold (1996) believes that for students to successfully plan their academic careers, they need to understand the semester calendar, its benefits, and its effect on their college experience (p. 42).

Jones (1997) compares academic credits to academic currency: "Credits are units that can be accumulated, banked, transferred, and...accepted as legal academic tender toward an earned degree throughout the country" (p. 577). He continues: "Credits make possible the extraordinary mobility of our students between fields of study, and between institutions" (p. 577). Credits

transfer easily when both educational institutions are on the same academic calendar.

Additionally, Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, and Suppiger (1995) propose: "If students are to transfer credit for the first two years of a baccalaureate degree from a community college to a four-year institution, the process must be smooth and guarantee that the students will be given every opportunity to succeed in the receiving institution" (p. 233). Although colleges are facing a number of problems, Wattenbarger, Bryant, and Varcoe (1998) identify articulation as one of the most common problems in education. Wattenbarger, Bryant, and Varcoe (1998) explain:

> The concern over the smoothness of student transfer between institutions requires the attention of higher educational leadership for two reasons: the need to assure students that the education they receive at one institution is comparable to the education they would have received at another, and the need to assure the public that student time is not wasted in repeating and/or duplicating courses. Both time and money are involved when a student is required to repeat courses, not to mention the frustration that is generated. The need for states to develop sound policies that will assure students of fair consideration of work that is completed is particularly important when there are several kinds of colleges in operation, each with a slightly different mission along with commonalities. These commonalities must be exchangeable as well as a fair assessment of the comparability of the differences among courses offered at the various colleges. It is obviously of benefit both to the students and to the public to develop good articulation practices. (Wattenbarger, Bryant,& Varcoe, 1998, p. 131).

According to Hickman (1998), about 85% of the nation's institutions of higher education are already on the semester

academic calendar (p.3). While some college administrators would like to forget the semester conversion and others embrace this more acceptable academic schedule, there may be some options.

The Class Options

The options include offering classes in different times and different formats. Although the majority of courses are presented in the traditional lecture style, other formats include videotaped classes, Internet, and videoconference classes. In addition to the fifteen-week semesters, mini-terms are an option. Another alternative is to offer a full evening and weekend schedule. Having options for class times would allow students to enroll in day or evening classes and facilitate students earning a degree. Bozman (1998) says: "Most conversion plans include a system that divides the year into fall and spring semesters, each with 15 weeks, plus an eight-week summer session and two five-week summer sessions"(p. 8). Bozman (1998) continues: "The advantages of converting to a semester system are easy transfers, more time for study, research, and completion of large projects" (p. 8). On the semester calendar, instructors will have more time to plan projects, activities, and depth of study.

Georgia educator McMath (1999) states: "At first, the faculty and students were unhappy with the decision to adopt a semester calendar. However, most now say the transition has been smooth. Now that the semesters are a reality, many students and administrators are talking openly about the advantages of the semester system" (p.2). McMath (1999) reveals that most of the

problems were related to classroom and lab space, but adds, "That may be a function of increased enrollment as well as semester conversion" (p.3). McMath (1999) continues: "With the semester conversion, faculty can use the opportunity to redesign the entire curriculum. This is also an opportunity to add or drop some programs from the curriculum. Within the program, it is a good time to add, drop, merge, or update classes" (p. 3). McMath (1999) concludes "The semester conversion is an excellent opportunity to create a program for evaluating transfer students for admission based on their specific degree programs" (p. 4).

Snyder (1998) believes that a university undergoing a conversion to semesters can expect to emerge anew from the struggle. Snyder (1998) says, "People had a lot of questions, and there was a lot of adjustment" (p. 2). He reveals that he had always thought semesters provided a better learning environment than the start-and-stop pace of the 10-week quarters (p. 3). Snyder (1998) claims: "Our curriculum had become stagnant and cluttered over time. It was badly in need of rethinking. The college needed a cleaner slate of programs more in keeping with modern challenges, and the faculty needed an opportunity to look afresh at all course offerings" (p. 5).

Evaluation

According to Cozby (1995), "There are four general types of evaluations: evaluation of need, process evaluation, outcome evaluation, and economic efficiency" (p. 23). He claims that many programs are really experiments designed to achieve certain

outcomes (p.10). An outcome evaluation determines whether the goal is being achieved. Generally, the researcher takes immediate action on the basis of the results of the evaluation.

McBurney (1994) believes that most program evaluators work for the organization being evaluated or for the external sponsor of the program. He claims that an evaluation has the potential to make the people who run the program look bad or good. If it makes them look bad, they may feel threatened. Depending on the outcome, the program could be modified or terminated (p. 318). This type of bias can be avoided if someone that is not otherwise involved in the project carried out the evaluation process. For this reason, the Director of Institutional Research conducted the evaluation process at Snead State.

Educator Kenneth Varcoe (1997) describes an effective evaluation:

> An evaluation is a formal set of procedures that are used to collect data and analyze it systematically for determining the value of a specific practice or anticipated practice. Educational evaluation seeks to determine the worth/merit of a specific product, process, activity, or project. It implies a degree of judgment about its effectiveness. An educational evaluation is not concerned with generalizations to other settings or products. Evaluation answers the question about whether something should continue as it is or be modified. . . .An evaluation can be used to improve a process or product, to make decisions or judgments, or it can contribute to the understanding of various factors that influence a program, project, or process (p.1).

Tagomori and Bishop (1995) claim that student evaluations are a controversial subject in educational institutions. They discuss two surveys conducted by the American Council on

Education (ACE). Tagomori and Bishop (1995)report the following: "Students must be asked questions within their experiential background to make relevant observations and to offer valid interpretations of those observations" (p. 64). In this practicum, students responded to questions concerning their observations and interpretations about the semester conversion process.

Tagomori and Bishop (1995) caution administrators against taking evaluation results at face value when making decisions. Tagomori and Bishop (1995) offer: "Students are not responsible for the composition, administration, fairness, or validity of evaluation instruments. The strength of an evaluation instrument depends on the validity of the items in the instrument" (p.64). Tagomori and Bishop (1995) list the following as flaws in the instruments examined in their study: (a) ambiguous, unclear, or subjective evaluation items, (b) skewed, ambiguous, and unclear responses to evaluation items, and (c) evaluation items that do not characterize performance, including criteria that refer to irrelevant events (p.66). Tagomori and Bishop (1995) conclude that most colleges and universities use numerous evaluation instruments, and not standardized forms, to assess performance (p. 74).

William C. Dwyer, (1996), an educator from Massachusetts, has written about his research concerning teaching methods and classroom experiences. Dwyer (1996) claims that most evaluations completed by students relating to their learning experience in

class are not valid. Dwyer (1996) makes the following recommendations when constructing evaluations: "Encourage student responses, keep it simple, make it easy to respond, watch the wording of questions, read the critiques, and incorporate good suggestions" (p. 144). Dwyer (1996) also says, "I believe that anonymity encourages students to give honest opinions. I have received a great number of responses and a lot of cooperation" (p. 142).

Summary

The literature discussed the debate concerning the quarter academic calendar and the semester academic calendar. Although some faculty members might believe that the 15-week semester would increase their workloads, they would have a longer period of time to prepare course materials. The literature compared aspects of past, present, and future trends in higher education. Since the 1970's, articulation has been a matter of concern in community and junior colleges. The literature revealed there are several types of evaluations—need, process, outcome and economic efficiency. Finally, the literature suggested several elements that should be included in an effective evaluation.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to evaluate student perception of the conversion to a semester academic calendar at Snead State Community College (Snead State). The evaluation methodology was used to achieve this goal. The vice-chancellor of the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education and a Semester Conversion Committee developed the evaluation questions. The first eight items included personal data and the remaining fourteen items utilized a Likert scale to measure students' perception about classes, degree requirements, academic advisement, student services, and articulation.

Sequential procedures were used to answer one research question for this study: "Has the transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State students?" Areas of concern included students' view of academic advisement, transference of previously earned college credits, and completion of program of study. This evaluation study included full-time students, part-time students, transfer students, and new students.

Procedures

This evaluation practicum was conducted by applying the following eight procedures: a literature review, establishment of criteria, validation of criteria, pilot test, evaluation

steering committee review, validation committee review, data collection, and analysis of the data.

Literature Review

First, a literature review was conducted. The literature review included Trow's (1997) comments concerning past, present, and future trends in higher education. Findings from studies concerning similar programs by Arnold (1996) and Jones (1997) were also discussed. Additional topics included in the review included the following descriptors either individually or in combination: two-year colleges, matriculation, articulation, evaluation studies, the pros and cons of semester conversion, and evaluation instruments. The literature also reviewed subjects concerning problems and solutions in higher education. The literature search included a review of documents published in periodicals, books, the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), brochures, textbooks, and newspapers.

Establishment of Criteria

Second, this was an objective-based evaluation model; so an evaluation steering committee suggested criteria for the evaluation. A committee directed by the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education had developed the questions for the evaluation instrument. This committee also conducted a pilot test in Montgomery before providing the evaluation survey questions to Snead State. However, the criteria for evaluating the Snead State students' responses were specified by a local evaluation steering committee. The list of criteria is included

in Chapter 4. Since the format for the survey had not been specified by the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education committee members, members of this local evaluation steering committee provided guidance in this area.

Validation of Criteria

Third, a validation committee was selected to validate the criteria for the evaluation. The validation committee was limited to individuals within Snead State.

Pilot Test

Fourth, a local pilot study was conducted in the counseling office with one student from each of five academic division areas. The purpose of this pilot test was to test the format and criteria of the survey responses with Snead State students. The academic divisions were Humanities, Natural Sciences/Mathematics, Technology, History/Social Sciences, and Fine Arts. Each member of the pilot test group was given a copy of the evaluation survey and instructed to complete it.

Evaluation Steering Committee Review of Pilot Test

Fifth, members of the evaluation steering committee reviewed the results of the pilot test and approved use of the criteria and the evaluation survey instrument for all students that would be participating in the study.

Validation Committee Review of Pilot Test

Sixth, the validation committee met to review the results of the pilot study. Committee members agreed that application of the criteria would answer the research question: "Has the

transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State students?" The validation committee agreed that the evaluation study should be conducted using the validated criteria for the evaluation instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis

Seventh, descriptive data were collected from the student population in the classrooms at Snead State. The student enrollment for the spring 1999 semester was 1259; however some of the students did not respond to the survey. Of those Snead State students who did respond, some students did not respond to all items. The instrument was distributed in the second-block of morning classes (9:10 a.m.), in the early evening classes (4:30 p.m.,5:00 p.m., 5:30 p.m., and 6:00 p.m.), in off-campus classes, and in all weekend classes that met. Seventy-six percent of the students attend full-time (enrolled at least 12 hours), and 24 percent of the students attend part-time (enrolled less than 12 hours). Dually-enrolled students were excluded from the study. The survey was dispensed to students at the beginning of the class period. The Snead State students were instructed to complete the form and return it to the proctor.

Eighth, the data were tabulated using the 1998 AUTODATA ® Systems software, followed by an analysis that compared what is and what should be.

Validation Committee Final Review

At the final meeting of the validation committee, they reviewed the results and analysis of the study. It was during

this meeting that the validation committee made recommendations concerning the results of the study.

Assumptions

For this practicum report, it was assumed that becoming aware of students' perceptions regarding the semester academic calendar would identify strengths or weaknesses with the new semester academic calendar. It was assumed that the students in this study represented a valid sample of the population. It was further assumed that the procedures used in this study were valid. Another assumption was that the members of the evaluation steering committee had the knowledge and expertise to guide this evaluation project. Finally, it was assumed that the validation committee's judgement of the results was valid.

Limitations

The evaluation from this practicum was limited to the specific views of the students at Snead State in the Alabama College System at the time the study was conducted. In addition, the results of this study may be limited to other community college students with similar characteristics such as age, gender, interests, abilities, employment status, and life experiences. The results should be viewed in the context of the student population that participated in the study. The results of the findings in this particular study are limited, and it is possible that performance may vary depending on factors such as length of time enrolled in college, previous college experience, and attitudes of individual students. The results of the

findings are also limited specifically to students at Snead State. While it is hoped that other agencies will be able to generalize this process, the specific evaluation results are institutionally-bound. Finally, results of this study may be limited because no one from outside the Snead State institution served on the validation committee.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

The purpose of the study was to evaluate student perceptions of the conversion from a quarter academic calendar to a semester academic calendar at Snead State Community College (Snead State). The methodology and procedures provided an overview and outlined steps of the evaluation process. Each step is presented below.

Literature Review

The literature verified a need for becoming aware of the students' perceptions of change in college routines and academic advisement on the semester academic calendar. It confirmed the need for advisors and students to plan course schedules.

Establishment of Criteria

The evaluation steering committee suggested the following criteria for the evaluation: (1) It was agreed that a Likert scale be utilized to record responses of students. (2) It was suggested that the following responses be used to differentiate between positive and negative perceptions–Strongly disagree (SD); Disagree (D); Undecided (U); Agree (A); Strongly agree (SA); Not applicable (NA). (3) It was determined that points would be assigned to each response as follows: not applicable-0 points, undecided-0 points, strongly disagree-1 point, disagree-2 points, agree-3 points, and strongly agree-4 points. (4) Committee members agreed that responses scoring more than fifty percent were considered a positive experience. Since items that were "not applicable" or "undecided" scored zero points, they were not

counted in the tabulation. Items that were "strongly agree" or "agree" were considered as positive statements. The validation committee agreed with the decisions as stated by the evaluation steering committee.

Validation of Criteria

To indicate whether they perceived the semester conversion process to be a positive experience, Snead State students were to choose from six options. The validation committee agreed that the criteria were valid and responses would answer the research question: "Has the transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State students?"

Pilot Test

The pilot test was conducted in the counseling office with five students. One student from each academic division—Humanities, Natural Sciences/Mathematics, Fine Arts, Technology, and History/Social Sciences—was included. Each member of the pilot test group was given a copy of the evaluation instrument, instructed to complete it, and return it to the proctor. Every member of the test group responded to each item on the evaluation instrument. A copy of the Semester Transition Survey Student Evaluation instrument is included in the Appendix.

Evaluation Steering Committee Review of Pilot Test

Members of the evaluation steering committee reviewed the results of the pilot test and approved use of the evaluation instrument for all students that would be participants in the study.

Validation Committee Review of Pilot Test

The validation committee met to review the results of the pilot study. They agreed that the responses sufficiently answered the research question: "Has the transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State students?" The validation committee agreed that the study should be conducted using the validated criteria for the evaluation instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis

The surveys were dispensed and administered during the spring semester 1999. The student enrollment for this term was 1259; however, only 1148 students responded to the survey. The students enrolled in the first, third, and fourth blocks of classes were not included in the evaluation. Additionally, some students did not respond to every question on the evaluation instrument. Evaluations were distributed in the second-block of morning classes (9:10-10:25 a.m.), in the early evening classes (6:00-7:15 p.m.), in off-campus classes that met 6:00-9:00 p.m. at the Arab Center and in the April 30-May 2 weekend classes. The classes during this weekend period met from 8:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.

The "strongly agree" and "agree" responses were tabulated as indicating the Snead State students' perception of the semester academic calendar as a positive experience.

The following table illustrates the questions and responses of participants in the evaluation study.

Table 1

Responses of Participants

Question	Total Responses To Questions Number	Agree/Strongly Agree Responses Number	Percent
1. The transition to a semester Calendar has been a positive experience for me.	1128	825	73.14
2. Faculty and academic advisors have helped me understand the effect of the semester calendar in a positive light.	1128	889	78.79
3. I am pleased with the response of College services (business office, admissions, financial aid)when I have asked questions related to the semester calendar.	1100	950	86.36
4. I received appropriate advising prior to semester conversion, enabling me to plan well for my course of study.	1105	845	76.48
5. Institutional or system-wide printed materials were helpful in my understanding of and preparation for the semester calendar.	1104	895	81.06
6. I believe that I will not lose any of my previously earned college credit as a result of the conversion.	1101	958	87.00
7. I prefer the longer semester term with shorter classes over the quarter calendar.	1105	694	62.80

(Table continues)

Question	Total Responses To Questions Number	Agree/Strongly Agree Responses Number	Percent
8. I believe that my understanding of class material is greater due to the semester calendar and the longer number of weeks spent in class.	1107	771	69.64
9. The ease with which courses transfer to universities under the semester calendar is important to me.	1103	1034	93.74
10. I believe that I will be able to complete my program of study in a timely manner under the semester calendar.	1110	879	79.19
11. In general, management activities of the College, such as registration and advising, are as efficient as before the conversion to the semester calendar.	1103	940	85.22
12. The semester calendar, as compared to the quarter calendar, allows me more time to maintain my employment status or pursue employment goals.	1106	868	78.48
13. The semester calendar, as compared to the quarter. calendar, allows me more time to fulfill my family obligations.	1104	858	77.72
14. I believe that transferring classes to universities will be simpler with all state colleges and universities based on the semester calendar.	1103	1002	90.84

Note: First, some participants in the study did not answer every question. Second, only the following responses were recorded: "Strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree", and "strongly agree." Responses of "Not Applicable" and "Undecided" were not counted in the tabulation of data.

Results from the study show the transition to the semester academic calendar was viewed as a positive experience by 73.14% of the students (Item 1). A total of 78.79% of students believed that faculty and academic advisors were helpful in understanding the effect of the semester academic calendar in a positive light (Item 2). The data shows that 86.36% of students were pleased with the response of College services when they asked questions related to a semester academic calendar (Item 3). It was also found that 76.48% of students said they received appropriate advising prior to the semester conversion, enabling them to plan for their chosen course of study (Item 4).

Results showed 81.06% of the students said the materials provided by the college were helpful in understanding the transition to a semester academic calendar (Item 5). The study revealed that 87.00% of students believed they would not lose previously earned college credit as a result of the conversion to a semester academic calendar (Item 6). Additionally, 62.80% of students prefer the longer semester academic calendar with shorter classes over the quarter academic calendar (Item 7). The results reveal that 69.64% of students believe they have a greater understanding of class material due to the semester academic calendar and the longer number of weeks spent in class (Item 8). The study revealed that 93.74% of the students say that it is important for them to know their courses would easily transfer to universities under the semester academic calendar (Item 9). Indeed, 79.19% of the students believed they would be able to

complete their program of study in a timely matter under the semester academic calendar (Item 10). In addition, 85.22% of students thought that management activities of the College, registration and advising, were as efficient as before the conversion to the semester academic calendar (Item 11). Results revealed that 78.48% of students said the semester academic calendar, as compared to the quarter academic calendar, allowed more time to maintain employment status or to pursue employment goals (Item 12). According to the data, 77.72% of students felt that the semester academic calendar would allow more time for family obligations (Item 13). Results show 90.84% of students believed transferring classes to four-year universities simpler with all state system colleges and universities based on the semester academic calendar (Item 14).

In conclusion, Snead State students rated faculty and academic advisement as positive, efficiency of management activities as positive, and ease of transferability to a four-year institution as positive. The students said they preferred a semester academic calendar over a quarter academic calendar and that they had more time for a greater understanding of class material and more time with their families. For a summary of all students' responses recorded on the evaluation, see Appendixes D and E. During the validation committee's final review, they agreed that the results and analysis of the study were valid. They also recommended a copy of the evaluation results be forwarded to Snead State administrators.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students at Snead State Community College (Snead State) perceived the conversion to a semester academic calendar as a positive experience. The evaluation was conducted to identify strengths and weaknesses of the process involving the semester conversion.

In the literature reviewed for this study, the researcher found several opinions concerning a conversion to the semester academic calendar. Hickman (1998) believes that two benefits of the academic calendar change may be increased enrollment and less expense because colleges, such as those in the Alabama College System, will have only three registration sessions (p.5).

The results of the study confirm Arnold's (1996) claim that the semester conversion could renew, reshape, and refocus the educational programs and have a positive impact on future students and development of the institution. The Alabama state legislation had mandated the conversion from a quarter academic calendar to a semester academic calendar. Therefore, Snead State administrators wished to create a smooth process of conversion. Snead State academic advisors utilized an Academic Program Completion Plan to address Arnold's (1996) concern that students cannot successfully plan their academic careers unless they understand the semester academic calendar, its benefits, and its effect on their college experience (p.42). Jones' (1997) analogy of academic credits as

currency being transferred and accepted as legal academic tender toward an earned degree (p.577) simplifies the concept of the conversion to a semester academic calendar.

Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, and Suppiger (1995) believe that students transferring credit from a community college to a four-year institution need a smooth process and a guarantee that they will be given every opportunity to succeed in the receiving institution (p.233). The researcher proposed that the Academic Program Completion Plan would provide students the opportunity to succeed. Understanding that students are enrolled in courses for a longer period of time, but are also enrolled in a greater number of classes per term would repudiate the idea that students cannot complete a program of study in two years. Criteria for the study included a statement that for Snead State students to perceive the semester conversion as a positive experience, more than 50 percent of students' responses should be "agree" or "strongly agree". The only responses recorded were "agree," "strongly agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." Overall, 73.14% of Snead State students believed the transition to a semester calendar had been a positive experience. However, 26.86% did not think it had been a positive experience (See Table 1).

Administrators were happy to learn that a majority of Snead State students perceived strengths of the semester conversion process as the following: the response of college services to questions concerning the semester calendar; printed materials that

were helpful in understanding and preparation for the semester calendar; belief that students would not lose previously earned college credit as a result of the conversion; the ease with which courses transfer to universities under the semester calendar; registration and advising that are as efficient as before the semester calendar conversion; and the belief that transferring classes to universities would be simpler with all state colleges and universities based on the semester calendar.

In addition, a majority of Snead State students perceived strengths of the semester conversion process as the following: the process of semester transition; faculty and academic advisors helping students to understand the effect of the semester calendar; appropriate advising prior to the semester conversion enabling students to plan their course of study; preference for the longer semester term; greater understanding of class material; belief that they would be able to complete their program of study in a timely manner; the semester calendar allowing more time to maintain employment or pursue employment goals; and allowing more time to fulfill family obligations.

To summarize the findings, the highest percentages were as follows: 93.74% of Snead State students believed strengths of the semester calendar were the ease with which courses transfer to universities under the semester calendar, and 90.84% of Snead State students believed that transferring classes to universities would be simpler with all state colleges and universities based on the semester calendar. The two lowest percentages were as follows:

62.80% of Snead State students preferred the longer semester term with shorter classes over the quarter calendar, and 69.64% of Snead State students believed that their understanding of class material is greater due to the semester calendar and the longer number of weeks spent in class. However, the lowest percentages are still within the "positive response" range as stated in the criteria guidelines. Therefore, all areas met the established criteria for a "positive experience."

Conclusions

The results of the study answer the research question: "Has the transition to the semester academic calendar been a positive experience for Snead State students?" Results show 73.14% of Snead State students' responded that they viewed the transition to the semester academic calendar as a positive experience. Additional conclusions can be made based on the results of this study. It was concluded that the evaluation survey instrument and criteria was appropriate and valid for the study. It was further concluded that the information gained from the evaluation instrument would be used to ensure that a smooth transition continued for students as they emerged from a quarter academic calendar and entered a semester academic calendar. It was concluded that one strength of the semester conversion was the ease with which courses transferred to universities under the semester calendar. A second strength was that transferring classes to universities was simpler since all state colleges and universities were based on the semester calendar. The results

from the study revealed that all responses met the established criteria for a "positive experience".

Implications

The results of the practicum report have implications that could improve the educational process at Snead State. Faculty and staff members could provide students with a Statewide Articulation Reporting System (STARS) guide that has a recommended schedule of classes for each semester in each academic program. Faculty and staff members could also verify that students follow a schedule of enrollment in courses designed to ensure students complete their academic schedules in a timely manner on the semester academic calendar.

There are implications from this practicum report that may be applied to the ongoing efforts of the Articulation Committee of the Alabama College System in the development of an articulation agreement among the Colleges and Universities of Alabama (Alabama College System, 1999). Snead State personnel could provide recommendations to the Articulation Committee of the Alabama College System concerning courses that may be substituted or transferred from one college to another.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The validation committee recommended to the researcher that the results of this study be presented to the Planning Council and that appropriate actions be taken by the college based upon the researcher's recommendations to address any perceived weaknesses. Faculty and staff members would provide

students with a STARS guide that has a recommended schedule of classes for each semester in each academic program. Faculty and staff members would also verify that students follow a schedule of enrollment in courses designed to ensure students complete their academic schedules in a timely manner on the semester academic calendar.

Recommendation 2. The validation committee recommended to the researcher that the findings be forwarded to the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education in Montgomery, Alabama, to be included with the results from other state colleges.

Recommendation 3. The validation committee recommended to the researcher that a copy of this practicum report be presented to the Articulation Committee of the Alabama College System. This practicum report could be used in the development of articulation agreements, such as the STARS program, among state two-year colleges and four-year universities.

Recommendation 4. The validation committee recommended to the researcher that a copy of the evaluation results be forwarded to Snead State administrators so that the results can be considered in the evaluation of present policies. The college subscribes to the philosophy of responding to the postsecondary educational needs of the citizenry of the college community. The results of this study were used in the evaluation of present policies and will continue to promote an academic environment that will further the philosophy, purpose, objectives, and services of Snead State Community College.

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Appendix A

Semester Transition Survey-Student Evaluation

EVALUATION INSTRUMENT

The Alabama College System recently converted from the quarter system to the semester system. Your experience with the transition and your opinion about the effect upon your academic career are important. Please respond to the following items by marking the applicable answer.

Demographic Data

1. Student Type:
   O Returning Student O First-time college student O Transfer student

2. Ethnic Background:
   O African American O Hispanic/Latino O Native American O White O Other

3. Student Classification:
   O Full-time (Equal to or greater than 12 hours) O Part-time(Less than 12 hours)

4. If you are a transfer student, was the college from which you came based on a:
   O Semester calendar O Quarter calendar

5. Age:
   O 16-25 O 26-35 O 36-45 O 46-55 O Over 55

6. Gender:
   O Female O Male

7. How many quarters have you attended this institution?
   O 0 O 1 O 2-5 O More than 5

8. How many semesters have you attended this institutions?
   O 1 O 2

Semester Transition Data

Please respond to the following items using the scale below. Mark the answer you feel is most applicable to each statement

SD-Strongly Disagree D-Disagree U-Undecided A-Agree SD-Strongly Disagree NA-Not Applicable

1. The transition to the semester calendar at this institution has been a positive experience for me.
   O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

2. Faculty and academic advisors have helped me understand the effect of the semester system in a positive light.
   O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

3. I am pleased with the response of College services (business office, financial aid, admissions) when I have asked questions related to the semester system.

   O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

(Survey is continued on next page)

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4. I received appropriate advising prior to semester conversion, enabling me to plan well for my course of study.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

5. Institutional or system-wide printed materials were helpful in my understanding of and preparation for the semester calendar.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

6. I believe that I will not lose any of my previously earned college credit as a result of the conversion.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

7. I prefer the longer semester term with shorter classes over the quarter calendar.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

8. I believe that my understanding of class material is greater due to the semester calendar and the longer number of weeks spent in class.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

9. The ease with which courses transfer to universities under the semester calendar is important to me.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

10. I believe that I will be able to complete my program of study in a timely manner under the semester calendar.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

11. In general, management activities of the College, such as registration and advising, are as efficient as before the conversion to the semester calendar.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

12. The semester calendar, as compared to the quarter calendar, allows me more time to maintain my employment status or pursue employment goals.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

13. The semester calendar, as compared to the quarter calendar, allows me more time to fulfill my family obligations.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

14. I believe that transferring classes to universities will be simpler with all state colleges and universities based on the semester calendar.
O SD O D O U O A O SA O NA

Appendix B

Summary of Semester Transition Survey

Student Evaluation--Part I--Demographics

Question/Response		#	%
1. Student Type	Returning student	751	66.40
	First-time student	290	25.64
	Transfer student	90	7.96
	Total	**1131**	
2. Ethnic background	African American	25	2.21
	Hispanic/Latino	3	0.27
	Native American	13	1.15
	White	1077	95.23
	Other	13	1.15
	Total	**1131**	
3. Student Classification	Full-time (Equal to or greater than 12 hours)	871	76.47
	Part-time (Less than 12 hrs)	268	23.53
	Total	**1139**	
4. If you are a transfer student, was the college from which you came based on a semester or quarter calendar?	Semester calendar	68	43.87
	Quarter calendar	87	56.13
	Total	**155**	
5. Age	16-25	792	69.47
	26-35	170	14.91
	36-45	126	11.05
	46-55	41	3.60
	Over 55	11	0.96
	Total	**1140**	
6. Gender	Female	708	62.27
	Male	429	37.73
	Total	**1137**	
7. How many quarters have you attended this institution?	0	344	32.42
	1	109	10.27
	2-5	415	39.11
	More than 5	193	18.19
	Total	**1061**	
8. How many semesters Have you attended this Institution?	1	328	29.34
	2	790	70.66
	Total	**1118**	

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Appendix C

Summary of Semester Transition Survey
Student Evaluation--Part II--All Responses

Question/Response	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	#
1. The transition to a semester calendar has been a positive experience for me.	89	7.89	214	18.97	481	42.64	344	30.50	1128	100
2. Faculty and academic advisors have helped me understand the effect of the semester calendar in a positive light.	83	7.36	156	13.82	781	69.22	108	9.57	1128	100
3. I am pleased with the response of College services (business office, admissions, financial aid) when I have asked questions related to the semester calendar.	63	5.69	87	8.57	795	72.27	155	14.09	1100	100
4. I received appropriate advising prior to semester conversion, enabling me to plan well for my course of study.	80	7.24	180	16.29	707	63.99	138	12.49	1105	100
5. Institutional or system-wide printed materials were helpful in my understanding of and preparation for the semester calendar.	52	4.71	157	13.31	807	73.09	88	7.97	1104	100
6. I believe that I will not lose any of my previously earned college credit as a result of the conversion to a semester calendar.	68	6.18	75	6.99	845	76.74	113	10.26	1101	100
7. I prefer the longer semester calendar with shorter classes over the quarter calendar.	241	21.81	170	15.38	500	45.24	194	17.56	1105	100

Question/Response	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
8. I believe that my understanding of class materials is greater due to the semester calendar and the longer number of weeks spent in class.	157	14.18	179	16.17	640	57.81	131	11.83	1107	100
9. The ease with which courses transfer to universities under the semester calendar is important to me.	30	2.72	39	3.54	714	64.73	320	29.01	1103	100
10. I believe that I will be able to complete my program of study in a timely manner under the semester calendar.	96	8.65	135	12.16	730	65.76	149	13.42	1110	100
11. In general, management activities of the College such as registration and advising, are as efficient as before the conversion to the semester calendar.	67	6.07	96	8.70	846	76.69	94	8.52	1103	100
12. The semester calendar, as compared to quarter calendar, allows me more time to maintain my employment status or pursue employment goals.	104	9.40	134	12.12	752	67.99	116	10.49	1106	100
13. The semester calendar, as compared to the quarter calendar, allows me more time to fulfill my family obligations.	112	10.14	134	12.14	738	66.85	120	10.87	1104	100
14. I believe that transferring classes to universities will be simpler with all state colleges and universities based on the semester calendar.	45	4.08	56	5.08	804	72.89	198	17.95	1103	100

Note: First, some participants in the study did not answer every question. Second, only the following responses were recorded: "Strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," and "strongly agree." Responses of "Not Applicable" and "Undecided" were not counted in the tabulation of data.

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APPENDIXES